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Criteria of importance

By LUIZ OOSTERBEEK

Dr Zilhão, former Director of the Archaeological Park of Foz Côa and former President of the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology (that had the chief responsibility of managing the Côa valley), presents his view, apparently dated to 2000, on what followed the historical decision to preserve the archaeological complex of the Côa valley, in 1995. As most readers will know, this has been the subject of intensive, and often not very serious, discussions.

In his paper, apart from useful data on the site (number of rocks, dates of legal diplomas enforcing the conservation policy), Dr Zilhão resumes his arguments, from the definition of a strategy for the Côa based on the sites of Les Eyzies and Altamira, to a prospect of 200 000 visitors in the near future, that would enable economic growth as well.

A lot has been written and said about this, but we are now in the year 2003. In his paper, Dr Zilhão presents the important figures of visitors: a steady growth, always above 20 000 visitors per year, until 2000. Reasons for optimism, then? The paper is well designed, but now we know that in 2001 visitor numbers plummeted by c. 4000, and in 2002 by another 1000! Why? What happened in 2001?

I guess a first comment must be that the steady growth has been broken, thus showing that perhaps Dr Zilhão got it all wrong. But why then? As far as I know, nothing major happened in the Côa valley after the year 2000. Why such a decrease, then? Maybe one should look for the answer a few kilometres further south, in the Guadiana valley, where news about an important rock art complex also emerged in the papers in 2001. Dr Zilhão, repeatedly, considered those carvings (that the public could see, through photos and drawings) as 'not important', thus giving a terrible image of the criteria archaeologists have on the issue of conservation of past remains. He also publicly attacked archaeologists that demanded greater efforts in the recording of such remains.

As I say, there have been, and there will be, different opinions on how to manage the Côa valley. But figures are not to be questioned, and if they clearly show that the 'steady growth' pointed by Dr Zilhão was abruptly broken in 2001, one should suggest possible explanations. I have suggested one. Maybe I am wrong, but in this case I would welcome alternative and sound arguments.

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Discretion and dignity

By MARCEL OTTE

Portugal has discovered its Palaeolithic at the same time as democracy. Everyone should rejoice. But this is not a reason to give lessons to an entire continent that has had experience in both for two centuries. Research on rock art has been undertaken across Europe with the same intensity as in Portugal today, but for a much longer time. We can thus attest to the existence of 'regionalism' in open-air Palaeolithic art. This does not reduce its interest, but adds to its true dimension: the history of a specific regional art must be understood as such, crossing the Portuguese border, in its totality, in conjunction with the much richer sites of the Spanish Meseta which have been studied with more persistence and discretion. Palaeolithic art clearly exists deep inside caves: this evidence cannot be put into question by a few open-air sites. Deep-cave art demands its own interpretation which cannot be resolved either by assimilation with open-air art or by its integration with all other forms of Palaeolithic art. The simple geographic distribution of cave art demonstrates that it is a characteristic effect, also regional, but infinitely more powerful than open-air art. Exposed rock formations surrounding this region, in both France and Spain, have been intensively surveyed, but without result. The lack of caves in the Douro region perhaps explains, locally, the inverse increase in open-air art, nothing more. Furthermore, from the Périgord to Vladivostok, caves are numerous and Palaeolithic sites innumerable and of an extreme richness. Yet only two caves with art are known south of the Ural. The burst of art in south-western Europe is thus itself a regional event, but of a staggering magnitude.

Art in rockshelters is also not unknown and did not require hydraulic dams or bitter political or philosophical controversies to be discovered and valued; Cap Blanc, Gorges d'Enfer, Angles sur l'Anglin and Roc de Sers are only a few examples among many others that have been discovered, described and interpreted modestly and serenely. If one relies on ethnographic comparisons from the other side of the world (but is this judicious?), one could assume that this is an art on ephemeral supports, such as bark and tent walls, even human bodies themselves. But archaeology is practised in this way: it is based on what can be known (and this is already a lot) rather than on the speculations of prehistorians (which is a good thing!).

Nothing is detracted from the superb works of open-air Palaeolithic art recently 'discovered' in Portugal, or from the superb efforts made by those Portuguese colleagues who have demonstrated their importance intelligently and in a dignified manner. But we know how to measure, with clarity and modesty, the place now taken by this art within a history so rich, complex and durable as that of the European Palaeolithic which extends across ten thousand kilometres and over thirty thousand years.

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